PROMISE
June 26, 2005

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Psalm 29
Genesis 6–9 (selected verses)

"This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature . . . , for all generations.
I have set my bow in the clouds,
and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth."
Genesis 9:12-13 (NRSV)

Everlasting God,
in whom we live and move and have our being:
You have made us for yourself,
so that our hearts are restless until they rest in you.
Give us purity of heart and strength of purpose
that no selfish passion may hinder us from knowing your will,
no weakness keep us from doing it;
that in your light we may see light clearly,
and in your service find perfect freedom;
through Jesus Christ our Lord,
who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and forever. Amen.

Book of Common Worship
The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)

There was an editorial last month in the *Chicago Tribune,* "Biblical Ignorance" (12 May 2005), that pointed out that when, in the past, American novelists gave their books titles such as *East of Eden; Absalom, Absalom;* and *Song of Solomon,* they could assume that everyone would understand that those words and phrases came from the Bible. That assumption is no longer valid. Americans, particularly young people, don't necessarily understand references to "wandering in the wilderness," "Damascus Road experience," don't know who Paul was or Moses. One English teacher made a comparison—"You know, like Noah and the ark"—and the kids looked at her quizzically and asked, "Who's Noah?"

My own personal experience happened when I preached a sermon during President Clinton's difficult days and said simply that God has a way of

using flawed people for God's purposes, and I used King David as an example. I got a call from a reporter the next day. He said, "We heard you preached a pretty good sermon about the president, Reverend. But tell me, who is that David guy?" I explained, and he was fascinated by the story of David and Bathsheba and Bathsheba's husband, Uriah—whom David got out of the way by sending him to the front line—and David and Bathsheba's baby who died, and second son, Solomon, who built a temple: Old Testament 101 on the telephone, Monday morning. He had never heard any of it.

So the *Tribune* editorial prompts me to a series of sermons based on a sequence of stories from the Old Testament book of Genesis:

Abraham and Sarah, Abraham and Hagar and Ishmael, their son
Abraham and Isaac on Mount Moriah
Jacob wrestling with an angel
Jacob and Esau, his estranged brother, whom he had earlier betrayed, and their
reconciliation
And, this morning, Noah

Do you remember when you discovered that if you stop moving and struggling when you are in the water and lie on your back and spread your arms and legs, the water will actually hold you up?

Here's a poem I discovered recently, *First Lesson*, by Philip Booth.

Lie back, daughter, let your head
be tipped back in the cup of my hand.
Gently, and I will hold you. Spread
your arms wide, lie out on the stream
And look high at the gulls. A dead-
man's-float is face down. You will dive
and swim soon enough where this tidewater
ebbs to the sea. Daughter, believe
me, when you tire on the long thrash
to your island, lie up, and survive.
As you float now, where I held you
and let go, remember when fear
cramps your heart what I told you:
lie gently and wide to the light-year
stars, lie back, and the sea will hold you.
(from *Lifelines: Selected Poems 1950–1999*)

There is something in that poem about what the distinguished psychiatrist

Harry Stack Sullivan used to call basic trust: the deep confidence that the world is trustworthy, the spiritual willingness to trust, something, someone. Without basic trust, Sullivan taught, things don't go very well for us.

There was a little item in the *New York Times Magazine* last week that caught my eye, down in the corner of the page: "Whom Do You Trust?" It was a Gallup Poll taken just last month, and it suggested that trust is a little fragile these days. The highest score went to the military—42 percent of Americans trust the military a great deal—but then it went downhill fast. Twenty-eight percent trust the police a lot, banks 22 percent, the presidency 21 percent, the Supreme Court 21 percent, TV news 12 percent, Congress 8 percent, big business 8 percent, HMOs 7 percent.

Whom do you trust? It is one of the oldest questions around. Author John Updike asks it in novel after novel and short stories. One of my favorites is titled simply "Trust Me." The narrator recalls the time his parents took him swimming when he was three or four years old. He remembers his father in the pool treading water. He, Harold, was standing on the edge shivering, mesmerized by all that water.

> His mother, in a black bathing suit . . . was off in a corner of his mind. His father was asking him to jump. "C'mon, Hassy, jump!" he was saying, in his mild, encouraging voice. "It'll be all right. Jump right into my hands." And so he jumped and remembers:
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> The blue-green water was all around him, dense and churning, and when he tried to take a breath a fist was shoved into his throat. He saw his own bubbles rising in front of his face, until something located him in the darkening element and seized him by the arm.
>
> He was in air again, on his father's shoulder, still fighting for breath. They were out of the pool.

His father had invited his trust, urged him to jump and then, at the last moment, pulled back his waiting arms and the little boy sank. Years later he tried to talk to his father about the incident. The old man said, "Wasn't that a crying shame? . . . Sink or swim, and you sank."

It is a basic question: Is there something trustworthy? Is there something, or someone, we can trust absolutely, who, when we jump, will not pull his arms back?

It is a question asked and addressed early in the Bible, immediately after the creation narrative. The story of Noah and the ark is one of the most familiar and least understood in the Bible, says Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann. Everybody focuses on the most interesting part of the

story—the ark and all those animals, two by two—but that, Brueggeman says, is not the most important part, nor is Noah the main character. God is, and the point is not life inside the ark for forty days but something important and new and stunning going on in the heart of God.

Meanwhile, we can't take our eyes off the ark. Someone is always discovering pieces of it on Mount Ararat in Turkey. Comedians use it for material. Bill Cosby did a hilarious routine of the initial conversation between God and Noah in which God is prescribing, in terms of cubits, the dimension of the vessel Noah is supposed to build, and Noah asks, "What's a cubit?" Someone said the church is like the ark: it's crowded and indescribably messy inside and you might think of leaving if it weren't for the storm outside. And one of my treasures, given to me by a Presbyterian congregation in Washington, is a small ark with a bearded Noah, staff in hand, a dove sitting on his shoulder, and two tiny lions and two woolly sheep. The pastor told me she hoped I could keep the lions and the sheep living peacefully in the ark of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). All those animals! A child of mine once asked if there were mosquitoes in the ark A Sunday school teacher told me about a little girl studying in science class the reproductive capacity of fruit flies, and she calculated the millions of fruit flies that the original two could produce in forty days. And even John Calvin, ever fastidious, speculated that the stench inside must have been pretty impressive.

The story, Brueggemann says, is a conventional, typical divine judgment story. God is unhappy with creation. Things have not turned out the way God intended. Human beings have broken all the rules and, instead of living in peace with one another and the creation, have turned out to be nasty, selfish, disobedient, violent, and destructive. It begins almost immediately, with Adam and Eve's disobedience, Cain's murder of his brother, Abel, and by the time we get to Noah, God has had it. God decided to do what Near Eastern deities do: smash everything to bits—in this case, flood the whole project. Divine justice demands punishment. God is angry. It is, by the way, the oldest idea people had of God: an angry judge, punishing recalcitrant and disobedient people, a dangerous God who has to be placated, which is what religion is for.

But then the most amazing thing happens. God has a change of heart. God notices Noah and Noah's family and starts to worry a little bit, care a little bit. God's heart is warmed. And suddenly, in the midst of this somewhat bizarre story, we have a radical new idea emerging: God is not an angry tyrant but a concerned parent. God is not an angry judge but father/mother, grieving for a lost child.

The story continues. Noah is now provided a way to survive and, for this new God-concept to proceed, an ark. God, did you notice, shuts Noah in,

literally tucks them all in the ark. The floods come. After forty days the rain stops. The floods start to recede. A dove Noah has dispatched returns with an olive leaf—another metaphor with biblical roots, signifying the renewal of life and peace on earth again. And then this remarkable promise: “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature . . . for all generations. . . . I have set my bow in the clouds and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.”

The rainbow, an inverted weapon of war, is now a sign of God’s promise to love and care for the earth, God’s promise to love and care for every living creature, for all generations. That’s a very inclusive promise, by the way. Before the Bible describes the Abrahamic covenant, the choosing of a people and a nation, Israel, to be a light to the world, the Bible is clear that God’s parental and loving care is for the whole creation and for all people. In this first covenant, all are part of God’s chosen. It so frequently comes out the other way: religion used as a way to build walls and barriers between people. But here, at the very beginning, is the proclamation and promise that God cares for and loves all people, that all are as precious to God as a beloved child is to a mother or a father.

Here, at the beginning, an invitation to put your basic trust in God.

At the time this story was first told, God’s people were in a situation of tremendous loss, stress, and helplessness. The Babylonians had defeated their army, leveled Jerusalem, and carried them off into captivity, into exile, a time when everything that was known, stable, and reliable vanished overnight. The people felt abandoned, alone, without hope. It felt like a kind of chaos, like the primal chaos before God brought order in the creation, the chaos of a mighty flood sweeping away everything that was purposeful and beautiful and precious.

I am here, God says, in this ancient story. No matter what is happening all around, no matter what is changing, count on me, remember the promise. I will help you through. And that, I would suggest, is a relevant word, across the many centuries, to you and me in the Year of our Lord 2005.

It is almost a cliché now to say that we live in the midst of radical and profound change, but we do. One of the most fascinating books I’ve read in a long time is Thomas Friedman’s recent book on globalization, *The World Is Flat*. Friedman will take your breath away with his examples of a brand new world that has already happened and the enormous changes ahead of us in the way business is done: 245,000 highly educated Indians answering American telephone calls, taking orders, selling furniture, making airline reservations.

My favorite so far is an enterprising McDonald's franchise owner in Missouri who has figured out how to provide faster and cheaper service by using a call service in Colorado Springs. "When you pull up to the drive-through kiosk, the order taker is 900 miles away connected to the customer and food preparers by high-speed data lines. . . . People picking up their burgers never know that their order has traveled two states and bounced back before they even started to drive to the pickup window" (pp. 40–41).

It is also a now well-known cliché to say that the world changed on September 11, 2001 and that we are now living in a new and dangerous world, full of threats we never imagined before, but it is true. And the challenge, the demand on business and industry, education, politics and religion, is to open our eyes to the new world in which we find ourselves and to think and act in new ways.

In the meantime, there is always the threat: the threat of danger and chaos, the threat of the flood, the threat of terrorism. The threat of chaos comes in many forms: any time we step outside our comfort zone—a new job, going to college, any new venture—and, of course, the threat of death, the death of dear ones, friends, the threat of our own death.

The story of Noah and the ark and the rainbow is an invitation to trust God absolutely and utterly. We Christians believe that the promise of the covenant was made and fulfilled again, centuries later, when one we know as God's Son lived among us and faced his own mortality, died our death, and then, on the third day, rose again—a sign, like a lovely rainbow, of God's victory over death, God's everlasting love, God's promise.

A very good friend of mine, Walter Bouman, emeritus professor of theology at Trinity Lutheran Seminary in Columbus, Ohio, is very sick and has been told he does not have long to live. Walt is a big man with a great unkempt beard, a wonderful sense of humor, a brilliant intellect, and the best teacher I've ever known. He taught so often at the church I served in Columbus that we made him an honorary Presbyterian.

He was invited to preach at an Episcopal seminary recently, and a mutual friend sent me a copy of the sermon. In it Walt described how his oncologist told him he had six to nine months. With his characteristic irreverent humor he remembered Woody Allen on the subject: "It is impossible to experience your own death and still carry a tune." And "Some things are worse than death. Have you ever spent two hours with an insurance salesman?"

Walt is listening to music, J. S. Bach mostly, visiting with friends, reading the newspaper, counting days, and remembering the promise. He told the congregation, "The resurrection of Jesus Christ frees us. We are free to do more with our lives than protect them. We are free to offer them."

And then Walt said

> We are called to love the world, to want clean air and water for everyone, to give ourselves to the service of peace instead of blindly following our leaders in senseless wars, to commit to the cause of justice, especially when our institutions and our country are guilty of injustice. That is a big order. But you are set free to pursue it by the resurrection of Christ, who has put an end to the dominion of death. We are free for the battle because the victory is already won.

He also told the congregation that he has been praying a little prayer he first prayed in German as a child:

> Lord Jesus, who does love me,
> Oh, spread thy wings above,
> And shield me from alarm.
> Though evil would assail me
> Thy mercy will not fail me.
> I rest in thy protecting arms.

The promise of Noah.

God will never abandon creation.

God will never abandon you.

God may be trusted absolutely.

> Lie back, daughter, let your head
> be tipped back in the cup of my hand.
> Gently, and I will hold you. . . .
> . . . remember when fear
> cramps your heart what I told you;
> lie gently and wide to the light-year
> dtars, lie back, and the sea will hold you.

Thanks be to God. Amen.